

# Whatever the role, Chris O'Dowd stands out from the crowd. His versatility — from IT geek to blind swordsman — is a strength, but he doesn't hide his Irish charm. Now Hollywood and BBC dramas are falling for it. Kate Butler reports



Being Irish almost stymied Chris O'Dowd's career. When Graham Linehan was casting for *The IT Crowd*, his follow-up to *Father Ted*, in 2005, he had no intention of using Irish actors. This was to be a story about everyday geeks, set in an anonymous IT department in a faceless corporation. Ireland had nothing to with it.

O'Dowd understood Linehan's reasoning. "Ted was a huge success, and he had another show where Dylan Moran plays the main character [Black Books], and he just wanted to get away from that," the Roscommon actor says. "But there's something in his writing that makes [Irishness] work."

Despite his best-laid plans, Linehan found O'Dowd irresistible. "He was so effortlessly funny that I couldn't say no to him," the writer explained at the time. O'Dowd has since starred in four series of the Channel 4 sitcom, and a fifth is on the way. Being Irish hasn't done him any harm.

"We decided early on that we just don't mention [that the character is Irish]," says O'Dowd. "London is full of Irish people and I feel strongly about keeping my accent for

as much stuff as possible, because we're still not shown enough on British television."

Not that O'Dowd hasn't been busy lately. On the big screen, he has played a cuckolded, Larry Gogan-inspired DJ in *The Boat That Rocked*; a blind swordsman of indeterminate nationality in *Dinner for Schmucks*; and a high-camp Lilliputian baddie in *Gulliver's Travels*. While all three films were forgettable, O'Dowd's performances were not.

His next project is not comedy at all. As the lead in the BBC dramatisation of a Michel Faber novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, O'Dowd's character is a Victorian heir to a perfume fortune who begins an affair with a prostitute played by Romola Garai. "It's essentially a dark period drama. I play a character that many people may find at times despicable and heartless," he says. "I don't know how I would try to play a faultless character. Whether it's broad stuff like the IT guy's slobbishness, or whether as in the *Crimson Petal*, a male character with a poor attitude towards women and who is full of delusions, those are easier to play."

Standing 6ft 4in with an elastic, genial face, O'Dowd is 15 stone of loquacious

personality. He performed with his local drama group as a boy, but forgot all about acting until he went to University College Dublin to study politics. While keeping a friend company at a drama-society audition, he was bitten by the bug. "I just fell for it, really enjoyed it. I don't know whether it was the narcissism or the attention-seeking, or the opportunity to explore characteristics I don't have as much as the characters I was playing have. And also I like hanging out with actors: the guys are generally fun, the girls are generally loose."

O'Dowd has since settled down — "I've got a house, a dog, a cat and all that stuff" — with his girlfriend, Dawn Porter, a journalist and documentary-maker. The youngest of five, he is still close to his family: he made a short film recently with his only brother, John, also an actor. "I feel like my sisters have been in a baby-making competition over the past three years," he says. "There are five kids between two of them under the age of three. I refuse to learn all of their names until they stop having them."

O'Dowd's father was a graphic designer and his mother went back to study at



Amiable clown: Chris O'Dowd; far left, with January Jones in the film *The Boat That Rocked*

## Another IT star surfaces

Richard Ayoade, who plays the oddball computer wizard Moss in *The IT Crowd*, is fast becoming a leading light of British big-screen comedy. *Submarine*, his debut feature as a director, is a perceptive, beautifully shot and amusing insight into adolescence that avoids the usual conventions: the central character, Oliver, is, on occasion, mean-spirited and consistently self-absorbed. It's been a hit on the film-festival circuit, with high-profile screenings at London, Sundance and Toronto. The Hollywood magnate Harvey Weinstein outbid three other suitors to acquire the film. *Submarine* is based on the book by Joe Dunthorne.

Ayoade, 33, says: "They said they thought of me as the director because they thought I was like the character in the book, that I was a strange egg."

Will Lawrence

university while he was a teenager. She is now a counsellor and psychotherapist. "There are loads of clichés attached to where actors come from. The big one is that they are the youngest in the family, and another is that something like 30% of actors have a parent in the mental-health industry, like a counsellor or psychotherapist."

"The therapist mother makes you talk about your feelings as a 14-year-old more than you feel comfortable with — more than I'm comfortable with as a 31-year-old. So I imagine back then, when I didn't like talking to girls, that talking to my mother about girls was not ideal. But it opens you up for taking those things later on, and [with] acting, you have to be a bit more open."

O'Dowd can also trace his creativity back to his father's visual influence. Although graphic design in Boyle in the 1980s mostly meant sign writing and van lettering, O'Dowd's father was also a computer geek — which is poetic given the role his son is best known for — while the walls of the family home were covered with his drawings. As a boy, O'Dowd would wallpaper his bedroom with Yorkie wrappers, as much for the strong graphics as for the blue and yellow colour scheme. He was an avid sports fan — he played minor football for Roscommon, and was Connacht tennis champion — and the chocolate-bar packaging coincided with his county's GAA colours.

"I think of things more visually," says O'Dowd. "When I consider a part and how

I'm going to do it, I'll think of him as an animal, or what he looks like and how he moves. Things like that are important, particularly in the chrysalis stage."

Once O'Dowd became ensconced in the world of theatre, including running the National Youth Drama Festival, politics at UCD got short shrift. He left drama school early because he started getting work on stage and television — in RTE's *The Clinic* and *Showbands* — and in films such as Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake*. Comedy didn't arise until he was cast in *Festival* (2005) as a stand-up comedian. In 2009, he bagged a part in *Dinner for Schmucks*, alongside Steve Carell, Zach Galifianakis and David Walliams. The premise was that a group of wealthy businessmen invite people with special talents to a dinner, but only to mock them. O'Dowd improvised much of his role.

"I thought the film was alright" he says. "I enjoyed it, but it wasn't without its difficulties in that it's making fun out of people, which isn't actually that funny. But it was a no-brainer to do. You get an opportunity to work with those kind of people at my stage, you just don't not do it. Improv, I think, is really important to all of them. They get that that's where quality lies. You're not going to get Carell and Galifianakis and go, 'Why don't you do it word for word? Not that I'm saying I'm at that level, it's just they know it should be a bottom-up industry, creatively.'"

This summer, O'Dowd plays eye-candy in the Judd Apatow-produced *Bridesmaids*, a comedy written by Kristen Wiig and starring most of the female members of *Saturday Night Live*. And he gets to keep the Irish accent. "Myself and John Hamm, who is the guy from *Mad Men*, fight over Kristen Wiig," he reveals. "It's almost like a John Hughes kind of film, very balls-out female comedy. With a bit of romance and an Irish cop in the middle of it."

O'Dowd's nationality might have been an obstacle during the casting of *The IT Crowd*, but it has never hindered him getting other parts. If anything, it's now an asset. "I think, at times, directors and producers bank on it [Irishness] adding a little bit of amiability to what you do. It would be remiss to not realise that fact. Irish people are charming and have an emotive accent. They say that the power of a word comes from the consonants and the feeling comes from the vowels. Because we elongate our vowels so much, there's much more feelings in our woodords," he says, drawing out his vowels with a luvvie flourish.

"The characters get imbued with that. You get away with a lot more and, if you're conscious of that, you can exploit it. I'm not the first Irishman to do that. Every barkeeper in New York knows about it."

Graham Linehan fell for it. It's no surprise Hollywood looks set to as well.

*The Crimson Petal and the White* is due on BBC2 this spring